DIVISIONS THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN HAMPSHIRE COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS, 1740–1775

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INTRODUCTION

In March of 1774 the people of Amherst, Massachusetts, finally got around to drafting a letter to the Boston Committee of Correspondence. Having ignored the earlier appeals of the urban radicals, the inhabitants of this western town admitted that they had been "Long silent" on the issues surrounding the growing political crisis in the east. Still, they declared that they were "not insensible of the oppression we suffer and the ruin which threatens us or . . . of the Diabolical Designs of our Mercenary and Malevolent Enemies Foreign and Domestic and we are ready not onley to risque but even to Sacrifice our Lives and Properties in Defence of our just rights & liberties." It was a message the Boston Committee of Correspondence could well appreciate. Not only did the Amherst people sprinkle throughout their letter bits of good Whig language about the "Diabolical Designs," "Tironey and Oppression falsehood & Corruption," and "malicious cunning" of "those villens in Exalted Station" in England; they also made a point of thanking "the vigilant and faithfull gardians of our rights" in Boston.[1] In short, the people of Amherst seemed to do just what the Boston Whigs wanted them to do: deny the legitimacy of a corrupted British government, accept the leadership of the Boston Committee, and commit themselves to a growing national movement that would soon reject the authority of the Crown altogether.

Such a letter could easily have come from any number of Massachusetts towns, especially those in the western half of the province. Like Amherst, many towns had been "Long silent" on the question of British oppression, and it took the repeated efforts of the Boston Whigs to stir their fellow provincials to broader political awareness and concerted political action. And yet when the

people of the countryside did respond, they generally did so with earnestness and enthusiasm, not just adopting the rhetoric and slogans of the Whigs but eventually taking up arms as the "embattled farmers" celebrated in our patriotic lore.[2] This combination of reticence and radicalism poses an important if somewhat paradoxical question: why would people who had remained apparently unresponsive or indifferent to the political crisis developing in their province before 1774 become such active participants in a violent political struggle, actually carrying through on their promise to "Sacrifice our Lives and Properties in Defence of our just rights & liberties" against the established government of the land? Quite simply, why did rural people become revolutionaries?

This study is an attempt to answer that question, to try to explore the political values of rural people in one part of New England as they entered the Revolutionary era. My interest in political values does not involve only a consideration of the well-articulated (albeit sometimes poorly written) statements that emerged from town after town in response to the Boston Committee of Correspondence, although those statements are of course important and significant documents. The scope is somewhat broader and is not confined to the Revolutionary period itself. I am most interested in the earlier period—roughly, the three decades preceding the Revolution—during which western towns like Amherst appeared to be "silent" on the issues of provincial politics. As John Adams suggested in a now-familiar analysis, the real source of the Revolution lay in a change in the "minds and hearts" of colonial Americans, "a change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people" in the years before the Revolution actually began.[3] The widespread feelings of hostility toward the British government that developed in 1774 and the eventual outbreak of armed conflict were only the culmination of an equally widespread but more gradual process of political transformation among the population at large. Following Adams's lead somewhat, I have attempted to discover signs of political transformation by examining the wide range of local events and activities that occurred during the middle of the eighteenth century, for it is from those local phenomena that I think we can best determine the fundamental political values of the inhabitants of the county. Indeed, I will argue that the political and social concerns that engaged people's energies on the local level did as much to shape

their political attitudes in the Revolutionary era as did the alleged tyranny and oppression of the Crown. The people of western Massachusetts may have been in one sense politically silent, but they were by no means politically dormant.

Admittedly, one ought to be a little wary these days about undertaking any sort of study that deals with the American Revolution. By now the whole thing may seem mercilessly overdone. No other topic in American history, with the possible exception of the Civil War, has received so much attention, both in scholarly writing and in popular celebration. The recent Bicentennial provided only the most excessive case in point. On the popular level the commemoration of the Revolution generated a steady flow of words from one end of the country to the other, a national binge of commercialism, boosterism, and plain bad taste. By July 5, 1976, most people no doubt felt they had heard all there was to hear; certainly many felt they had heard enough. For historians, unfortunately, there is an even greater danger than oversaturation. Too great a fascination with the Revolution as the main event in eighteenth-century American history can lead to a tendency to skew all historical analysis toward explaining the Revolution: by looking so hard at the Revolution we can lose sight of more subtle, less conspicuous historical phenomena, or at least misinterpret those we do see. It is bad enough to add to the glut in the present, but even worse to create a distortion of the past.[4]

Why, then, should anyone run the risk of adding to either the glut or the distortion? The only decent answer is that there are still decent questions. Despite the obvious problems of overemphasis and overindulgence in the past few years, some of the recent scholarship on the Revolutionary period has seemed remarkably fresh, generating a lively investigation not just of the nature of the American Revolution, but of the fundamental nature of political and social change. During the late 1960s, for instance, the dominant position belonged to the argument put forth by Bernard Bailyn and his followers, the notion that the Revolution was "above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy." Throughout the 1760s, so this argument went, American colonists became increasingly alarmed by Crown policies, began to

adopt the old English Whig language emphasizing a devious conspiracy against the rights and liberties of the people, and eventually developed a particularly American political identity that helped them break with England. Bailyn's followers have argued that this sentiment was common not only to the radical leaders in the cities but—as the Whiggish language of the Amherst letter might well suggest—to many people throughout society at large. In general this ideological explanation stressed a growing unanimity among Americans defined by their growing animosity toward the Crown and their growing sense of common purpose.[5]

The real strength of such a comprehensive argument, of course, was that it spurred other historians to challenge or at least refine it. Rather than portray the Revolution simply as a kind of national monolith uniting the colonists under a single banner, some have explored the variety of popular responses, trying to analyze more clearly the connections between the larger political movement and the particular conditions that pertained in different parts of the American colonies. We now know more about the significance of the Revolutionary movement in numerous towns or regions from New England to the South; we now know more about the emergence of more clearly articulated political values among people of different class backgrounds in both urban and rural settings, the growth of a rather specific "popular ideology" in addition to the broader, more comprehensive Whig ideology; and as a result we are beginning to know more about the many meanings of the Revolution to the American people, even to some of those who chose not to support the patriot cause.[6] By taking this somewhat narrow and localized focus, many recent works have offered us a better appreciation of the Revolution as a social and political movement among common people, as their struggle to deal not just with the issues of American rights and independence, but also with some of the more immediate issues that affected their daily lives.

To be sure, this emphasis on the local context has done more than simply revive an interest in Carl Becker's earlier distinction between the questions of "home rule" and "who shall rule at home"—although that distinction still suggests a useful line of inquiry that has by no means been exhausted.[7] Even more important, this emphasis on local social conditions and political values has helped revise our understanding of the connection between

society and politics. Rather than commit the reductionist mistake of submerging local analysis in an explanation of the Revolution, some historians have taken just the opposite tack, trying to locate the Revolution within a larger process of social change, perhaps especially with regard to the transformation of the comparatively simple, stable, traditional agrarian society of the early eighteenth century to the more complex, unsettled, even more "modern" capitalistic society of the nineteenth century. In that sense the Revolution stands as a heightened historical moment at which social conditions and relationships in a particular era became most clearly outlined, enlarged, and contrasted. The events of the Revolutionary period help reveal and explain the situation of people in the pre-Revolutionary period, not vice versa. If we are now less able than we once were to arrive at a unified synthesis to encompass this variety, it may be just as well. A little complexity and confusion are signs of work in progress.

I would hope that this study adds not so much to the confusion as to our appreciation of the complexity. Hampshire County was a remote, fairly isolated region of New England, distant and distinct from the political world of Boston. For that reason I think it offers a good opportunity for focusing on the nature of political values among rural people. As the subtitle of the study suggests, I assume that "politics" and "society" are closely related; indeed, it is virtually impossible to understand the political values of a given population without having some understanding of the social context within which that population lives. People form certain attitudes on the basis of their personal experience, from their perceptions of themselves in relation to other people and in relation to the ideas and standards of their culture as a whole. Those attitudes are political in the sense that they reflect an understanding of the nature of human society, however limited that society may be. I do not mean to argue for some mechanistic approach dependent on simple economic determinism or, even worse, for a pseudo-psychological analysis of what Bailyn has called "mysterious social strains."[8] I would suggest, rather, that we can best understand those political values by examining what people say and do, especially when they are dealing directly with the conditions they face in their daily lives; in that sense social strains are hardly "mysterious" to the people involved but are very real, concrete, and immediate issues. In eighteenth-century New England, most people

were farmers, not philosophers. They may not always have acted in accordance with a coherent ideology—"popular" or otherwise—but they nevertheless acted with an awareness of their own situation and their own goals. If we hope to understand something of their world view, we must keep in mind the limits of the world under their view.

I have chosen the limits of the world under study here fully aware, I think, of both the benefits and the burdens. Studying a county rather than, say, a single community requires certain conceptual and methodological choices, the first of which is the willingness to sacrifice some depth for breadth. As one historian of colonial New England has put it, one can "either deal with many towns, asking few or shallow questions, or . . . deal thoroughly with a single town, running the risk of describing an untypical example."[9] Certainly the rich and detailed information contained in some of the better community studies—the analysis of birth and death rates, household composition, geographic mobility, social mobility, economic stratification, and so forth—would be nearly impossible for one person to produce for each of the forty-odd towns of late eighteenth-century Hampshire County. Yet because several scholars have recently begun to undertake that kind of close analysis for a few Hampshire towns (and here I want to thank them and encourage their future efforts) I have been able to draw on their data as well as my own to provide some of that information for some of the towns when the argument seemed to call for it.[10] In other cases I have relied on somewhat broader measures—totals of net population change, patterns of political leadership, levels of agricultural and economic development, and so forth—derived from provincial census and valuation records as well as from town and county records in order to show comparative figures for a greater number of towns.

In the end, though, this study does not depend primarily on the statistical analysis of quantitative data. It deals instead with popular social and political values, the kinds of human qualities that remain elusive, sometimes difficult to define, almost always difficult to measure. For the most part the evidence derives from a variety of narrative sources—diaries, letters, sermons, petitions, descriptions, depositions, and declarations—that record the attitudes and activities of the people who lived in eighteenth-century Hampshire County. In using such sources I have tried to be fair to

the people who created them, tried to understand the particular meaning they attached to their words and actions. But I have also tried, as any historian must, to be sensitive to the implicit meanings of their words and actions in light of a broader historical context.

In that respect I think the regional focus of this study allows for a valuable exploration of the complex social and political relationships that involved the people of the different towns. My earliest reading of both town and county records convinced me that it was very difficult to isolate one town from the others. The history of Hampshire County towns—including their settlement, economic development, political leadership, and ecclesiastical order—reflected a number of regional connections too prominent to ignore. Jonathan Edwards once referred to Hampshire County as a "neighbourhood," and it is that notion of neighborhood, with its suggestion of interrelationships and similarities, that I want to examine here. Though the narrative occasionally relies on an extended anecdote for the sake of example, my purpose is to suggest not so much the peculiarities of one local incident as the pattern of regional trends. In general, by looking at similar events and phenomena in a number of towns at once, I hope to outline the overall pattern of social development and political behavior across the landscape of Hampshire County, and in doing so to offer a better sense of the common experience of the people, perhaps a better understanding of their shared history on the eve of the Revolution.

That history has received little attention of late. Since the 1950s the standard—indeed, almost the only—published work on eighteenth-century western Massachusetts has been Robert J. Taylor's *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution*. Even the most recent studies of colonial social and political history cite Taylor more or less as gospel. In Taylor's view, the distinctive feature of the region's political culture in the pre-Revolutionary era was a pervasive and fundamental rural conservatism. At the top of the social and political structure stood the powerful men called River Gods (John Stoddard, Israel Williams, John Worthington, and a few others) who ruled the county almost without challenge up to the time of the Revolution. The dominance these men exercised over the region derived in large part from their hold on the "confidence of the royal governors . . . [and] an extensive patronage machine"

operated by the governors. But at the same time, suggests Taylor, the inhabitants of western Massachusetts themselves seemed to be a rather quiet, politically apathetic, almost docile lot. Within the region as a whole the conservatism of the inhabitants was reflected in a general absence of social or political discord. What disputes did arise over questions of land ownership or religious doctrine, for instance, "were local petty quarrels, of no significance beyond the confines of the town." Moreover, western farmers likewise "tended to be conservative" in their attitudes toward provincial policies and generally "exhibited an indifference to political matters" beyond their immediate sphere. If they chose to send representatives to the General Court at all, and most towns chose not to do so, they repeatedly sent the men who constituted the county's ruling elite. In that sense the continuing political leadership of the River Gods seems to fit reasonably well with the charge of general political inertia among the people. In short, Taylor describes a region marked by the prevalence of hegemony and harmony, by a fundamental sense of agreement between the people and their rulers and among the people themselves.[11]

In the end, argues Taylor, it took the Revolution to break up the local harmony. Only in 1774, when the Intolerable Acts threatened to impose more direct Parliamentary control over judicial salaries, did western farmers become mobilized and militant. Long uneasy about the power of the courts over their lives, they saw the possibility of increased British control as a severe danger. Almost immediately they rose up and closed the county courts, and in doing so they deposed the River Gods, who for years had dominated the bench. At the same time westerners quickly overcame their hostility or indifference toward eastern radicals and even accepted them as leaders in the Revolutionary cause. "The striking fact about the history of western Massachusetts in the eighteenth century," Taylor concludes, "is the profound educative force exerted by the American Revolution. From Revolutionary leaders westerners learned both the technique of revolt and the language of natural rights philosophy."[12] In those towns, then, the Revolution became an agent of sudden and massive political transformation: external events and external leaders caused the people of the region to change both their political allegiances and their political behavior almost overnight.

The purpose of this study is not to flay Taylor's analysis or

revise his argument point by point. By all means, there is much to be said for his book, especially for its discussion of the conservative style of rule exercised by the River Gods and the apparent political isolation of westerners from the political world of Boston. But the strength of that analysis also leads to an important conceptual weakness: the attention paid the power and authority of the ruling elites tends to obscure the political role of other people in the region. It assumes rather too easily that the conservatism of the common people—their rural parochialism and general indifference to provincial affairs—formed a harmonious whole with the conservatism of their rulers. Certainly the implied harmony between the rulers and ruled does not suggest a very convincing explanation for the sudden outburst of radical activity in the west at the time of the Revolution. However unintentionally, Taylor's explanation of Revolutionary politics in western Massachusetts—the apparent shift from deference to defiance, the predominant concentration on the issue of the local courts, the sudden acceptance of radical leaders from the east—depicts the people of the west as being politically fickle and perhaps even rather feeble. Like a number of other studies of the Revolution, Taylor's book, in focusing on political leadership, does not allow for a fuller exploration of the complexity of political change among the people at large.

For that reason I think it is necessary to look carefully at the activities of those people in the years preceding the tumult of the Revolution. The picture is in many ways quite different from the one Taylor draws. Indeed, throughout the middle of the eighteenth century Hampshire County was far from being a region marked by peace, harmony, and apathy; communities in all parts of the region became embroiled in a variety of conflicts, and between 1740 and 1775 the county experienced recurring outbreaks of local unrest. In terms of religious life, the years of the Great Awakening brought a number of ecclesiastical disorders, and for years afterward groups of evangelicals and Separates continued to upset the established order of the county. Though the organized clergy of the county, the Hampshire Association of Ministers, attempted to restore some degree of unity after the Great Awakening, throughout the 1750s and 1760s its effectiveness as a source of regional authority deteriorated in the face of repeated challenge. On the secular level conditions were no more stable. I draw spe-

cial attention to the effects of a dramatic population increase on the social and political life of the county after 1740. In the decades before the Revolution the population of the county more than doubled, and the older towns faced the considerable problems of overcrowding and political instability: almost every one of these older towns eventually had to subdivide into two or more separate towns, and the divisions seldom came about altogether peacefully. At the same time much of the population moved into new settlements on the frontier, and the number of towns in the county more than tripled. The political significance of this dispersal of the population lay primarily in the creation of new and independent political entities no longer directly under the control of the old towns and the old leaders; like the clergy, the established political leaders of the county found their position repeatedly challenged and gradually eroded over the years, and the Revolution served to make that challenge more sweeping and complete.

Just as it would be inaccurate to magnify the unrest far out of proportion, so is it mistaken to suggest, as Taylor does, that each case of local conflict was "of no significance beyond the confines of the [particular] town." Taken together, these "petty quarrels" suggest a broader pattern of political behavior that helps define the conflicting political values of various groups of people in the county. Indeed, this study will argue that the rising level of conflict throughout the middle of the eighteenth century reflected a clash of two fundamentally different attitudes toward social and political order, which could both be described as conservative, perhaps, but which were hardly harmonious. On the one hand there stood, quite unmistakably, the awesome authority of the county elite. By the early years of the eighteenth century the leading ministers and magistrates in Hampshire County had combined power, patronage, and paternalism to fashion an extensive network of regional rule; although they all had considerable influence in their particular towns and churches, their ties of friendship and kinship helped them reach above the community level to develop broadly based organizational structures for governing the county as a whole. In short, the county elite sought to create a source of authority superior to the autonomy of the individual towns.

On the other hand there emerged a widespread movement among common people to maintain—or regain—local control of

their political and religious affairs. Especially with the upsurge of religious revivalism and the even more general expansion of the population in Hampshire County by the middle of the century, a growing number of people sought to establish their own independent churches and towns, to recreate the traditional patterns of town life, and in the end to separate themselves from the dominance of the county leadership. This second sort of conservatism, with its emphasis on localism and in many cases on strict religious practices, was almost reactionary in nature, looking back to standards of an idealized past that had been eroded by years of demographic and economic change throughout New England. But in the particular context of Hampshire County this apparent attempt to recapture the past provided the impetus for extreme and almost revolutionary change.

By 1774, then, the growing imperial crisis became superimposed on a pattern of localized crisis in the west. People had been involved in their own political struggles for years. They had of necessity become political actors, gaining immediate experience in organizing and acting on a common principle, gaining perhaps a heightened sensitivity to political rights and ideals. The point is not to argue simply that these local issues somehow represented in microcosm the fundamental issues of the Revolutionary movement. It is important to maintain the distinction between the national and the local movements and not to merge one too easily into the other. It is more accurate to say that the national and local movements remained different and yet contributed to each other. Not only did local events in pre-Revolutionary Hampshire County create a background of political activity and experience that prepared the region's inhabitants for the larger, national struggle, but in turn the Revolutionary years created a context for the continued pursuit of local issues: that is, the outbreak of the Revolution helped accelerate political changes that were already taking place within the region. To be sure, Hampshire County did not experience a radical political or social revolution between 1774 and 1783; neither did any other part of the colonies. But by beginning to understand how local events in the Revolutionary period still reflected certain longer-term local issues, we can get a better sense of the connections people made between concerns in which they had been long engaged and others on which they had been long silent.